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ABSTRACT

Intended to help middle grade teachers and school leaders explore conferences as a communication strategy for school family partnerships, this booklet provides guidelines for designing or refining a conference format to meet the needs of teachers, students, parents, and families. Following an introduction, the first section examines scenarios that illustrate how four schools designed conference formats for their particular needs. The four formats considered are: (1) the advisory conference, which involves principals, counselors, and teachers in leading advisory groups of approximately 18 students in grades 6 through 8; (2) the student-led conference, during which students in grades 5 through 9 present to parents and teachers a portfolio of assignments and self-assessments; (3) the arena conference, which offers parents an opportunity to meet with each of their children's teachers on a one-on-one basis; and (4) the team conference, which involves teams of teachers, support personnel, and administrators meeting with parents and families in three different types of conferences. The second section discusses elements for effective conferences, including school policies that promote best practices and strategies found to work well in actual conference settings. A comparison chart that breaks down conference elements for the four scenario schools is also included in this section. The booklet concludes with an annotated list of seven resources. (AC)

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School & Family Partnership Series

School and Family Conferences in the Middle Grades

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School and Family Conferences in the Middle Grades

Introduction

Conferences are one of the traditional ways that teachers and other school staff communicate with families concerning the academic, social, and emotional growth of their children. Families take many forms and may include – among others – grandparents, aunts or uncles, or siblings. Current research indicates that when parents or other family members, teachers and schools collaborate, students are more successful. However, Joyce Epstein, co-director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Johns Hopkins University, estimates that in the middle grades less than 50% of all families have conferences with their children's teachers.

...educators are challenged to create opportunities for family participation at a time when, typically, families are becoming less and less involved in their children's school lives.

Maintaining communication between families and schools presents educators with enormous challenges. One challenge involves the many developmental changes that adolescents are experiencing – for example, the struggle to maintain a sense of belonging while establishing an individual identity. As students make the transition from elementary schooling to the middle grades, families may also struggle to maintain a sense of belonging. During this transition, the structure of the school may change. Students usually face larger classes and more teachers. Parents often feel less able to help their children and uncertain of who to contact with concerns. The school may be located farther from the home, further diminishing a sense of connectedness between the school and its families. Thus, educators are challenged to create opportunities for family participation at a time when, typically, families are becoming less and less involved in their children's school lives.

A common misperception is that conferences only occur when problems arise. However, when used effectively, conferences can be a key strategy to help maintain communication and cooperation between families and teachers, provide a proactive chance to become acquainted before problems arise, and gain goodwill and support of parents and families.

Purpose

This booklet is intended to help you, as middle grade teachers and school leaders, explore conferences as a communication strategy for school/family partnerships. It provides guidelines to help you design or refine a conference format that serves your needs and those of your students, parents, and families. The format that is most appropriate for your school community will become more defined as you examine:

Section 1... scenarios that illustrate how four schools designed conference formats that addressed their communication needs;

Section 2... elements for effective conferences, including schoolwide policies that promote "best practices;" what some teachers found to work well for them in actual conference settings; a comparison chart that breaks down conference elements for the four scenario schools and allows you to examine these same elements for your school; and

Section 3... an annotated resource list for you to use as you explore new ways to design or refine school and family conferences.

Section 1

Conference Scenarios

For students, families, and schools, conferences often set the tone for the relationships that exist among these "key players." Purposes for conferences include:

- *helping to establish face-to-face relationships;*
- *providing families with opportunities for involvement;*
- *reinforcing the idea of working as a team;*
- *planning for student success;*
- *assessing student progress;*
- *celebrating successes;*
- *solving problems that emerge; and*
- *involving students in their education.*

Conferences are one way that schools can help parents and families understand the changes from elementary schooling to the middle grades. Sharing and receiving information is a primary goal in conferencing. The flow of school-level information such as class requirements from multiple teachers, school procedures, and grading systems is especially important during the middle grade years.

Now let us look at four scenarios taken from actual conference practices in schools. Each scenario depicts a different approach for designing and implementing conferences. These examples illustrate choices of formats that meet one or more purposes for communication and are adapted to local family and school conditions. When reading the scenarios, use these questions to help you focus on the relationship between conference format and specific needs:

- *How does each conference format take into account the differing purposes and content of family/school communication and local student, family, and community conditions?*
- *What are the roles of students, family members and teachers in each conference format?*
- *How does each conference format encourage active family involvement?*
- *What are the advantages and disadvantages of each format?*

Scenario 1: The Advisory Conference

Serving a mix of rural, small town and suburban students, Carver Middle School uses an advisor-advisee program. Students in grades 6, 7, and 8 are divided up into advisory groups. Each professional staff member, including both principals, the counselors, and all teachers, is assigned an advisee group of approximately eighteen students – equal numbers from each grade level.

From the beginning of the school year, each advisor meets with his/her advisory group daily to provide students with more personal contact. On a weekly basis, counselors provide advisors with activities designed to help teachers get to know students, to encourage students to get to know each other, to help students learn how to set and meet realistic goals, and to encourage students to get involved in school activities. Students continue with the same advisor throughout their middle school years. Conferences at Carver Middle School are scheduled for the end of the first and third quarters of the school year. Scheduling with each family is attempted by letter and/or by phone call. Conference report forms, including students' evaluations of their own progress as well as their teachers' assessments, are handed out during the conferences.

Prior to conferences, advisors review their advisee's quarterly report forms (one per class). Advisors note their own specific concerns and attempt to anticipate parents' questions. All advisors then assemble and seek out individual teachers in order to gather information about those specific concerns and questions. Time during the advisory periods preceding conferences is devoted to conference preparation since students are encouraged to attend conferences with their parents.

During the 30 minute conferences, students, parents, and advisors review conference report forms and work samples. Students discuss their progress with their parents and advisors. They may also discuss goals for the next quarter or review their progress toward goals from the previous quarter. Students are asked to set three goals: one school goal, one personal responsibility goal, and one home/family goal. Joint parent/student/advisor problem solving is encouraged and advisors are often asked to follow up on specific questions and concerns. Parents may also schedule or request conferences with individual teachers when they feel additional information is necessary.

Scenario 2: The Student-led Conference

The Grant School's Upper School, set in a metropolitan downtown area, serves diverse students in grades 5 – 9. The conference process begins in August before classes start. Each student, and his/her parents, meet with the homeroom teacher, a core subject area teacher for the student, to set goals for the upcoming year. Conference participants share goals and expectations for the student in social, emotional, and academic areas. Input is sought from the parents and the student on student learning styles, interests, strengths and challenges. As necessary, other teachers who will be working with a particular student are given critical information from the conference.

After the planning conference, parent/student/teacher conferences are scheduled by letter or phone at the end of each of the first three quarters (and as needed) to review and discuss the goals and expectations specified during this first conference. Students present a portfolio they have prepared containing work samples and self assessments. Teachers share their insights through narrative progress reports. Each student discusses individual work samples and progress toward goals, and offers his/her perspective on any questions that may arise. Joint parent/student/teacher problem solving is encouraged and participants are often asked to follow up on specific issues.

At the Grant School, students are encouraged to take an active role in their own conferences. Homeroom teachers prepare students to facilitate their own conferences. Before conferences, the teacher meets with individual students to discuss their narrative report, to review the student's portfolio contents, to discuss the student's self assessment, and to coach the student in his/her role as conference facilitator.

Conferences take place in homeroom classrooms. Coffee is available in the parent lounge and refreshments are served during conference days. A network has been set up by parent and teacher volunteers for families needing transportation on these days. Parents and students complete a conference evaluation after the conference is concluded. Contact with other teachers is encouraged through additional formally scheduled conferences or through informal contact.

Scenario 3: The Arena Conference

Parent-teacher conferences at Elk Meadow Consolidated School (grades 7-12) are scheduled at the end of the first and third quarters after grades are sent home.

Conference dates are printed on the school-year calendar and publicized again in the newsletters which are mailed out prior to the conferences.

Elk Meadow is a large suburban school and conferences are a key link in the family/school relationship. Teachers at Elk Meadow use the arena conference format because it provides the opportunity for them to meet one-on-one with each parent who wishes to confer with them. Students may choose to accompany their parents to the conferences. School counselors are also present to meet with interested parents and students. School administrators circulate during the conference evenings, making themselves available as well. Students serve refreshments and child care is provided by student and parent volunteers.

Conferences are held on a "walk-in" basis on two consecutive evenings for a three hour period. To help parents locate specific teachers in the gymnasium, placards identify individual teachers and teachers are seated by subject areas clearly marked with signs. During the conferences, teachers discuss student work such as performance on assignments, quizzes and tests. Attendance is also discussed. Due to the large numbers of parents attending, parents and teachers are encouraged to limit their individual conferences to 10 minutes. If more conference time is needed, parents are encouraged to make appointments with teachers for additional meetings.

Parents are asked to complete conference evaluation forms. These forms are available as they leave the gymnasium and are published in the spring newsletter.

Scenario 4: The Team Conference

Due to a long-standing desegregation order, Lincoln Middle School serves a highly diverse population of 675 students in a suburban area. Each school "family" is composed of 4 core subject teachers, 2 or 3 support or administrative personnel (e.g., foreign language teacher, special education teacher, counselor, principal) and approximately 135 students. Each Lincoln staff member has an advisory group of approximately 20 students. School staff have developed five broad standards for students. These standards include: self-directed learner, collaborative worker, complex thinker, quality producer, and community contributor.

A framework of three conferences was established to support the philosophy at Lincoln Middle School. An open house night is held early in the fall to include parents and families in their children's school "family." The open house is held in each team area; team areas consist of classrooms constructed with portable walls. Each teacher in the team makes a presentation during the open house that consists of procedures and policies – including student/family learning experiences, thematic unit topics and activities, performance assessments, and grading.

One afternoon each month students are released from classes to permit students, parents and families to conference with team members; parents are notified by telephone. Each conference is scheduled in advance allowing the full participation of team members and any support or administrative personnel. Team conferences are used for various purposes: problem-solving, sharing/receiving information about students, and follow-up to previously identified problems. Team conferences may be requested by the student, parents/families, team members, or other school staff. The length of each conference varies depending on its purpose. If no conferences are scheduled, team members use this time for joint planning.

At the end of each semester students are required to participate in a unique kind of conference called "Portfolio Evenings." During the semester, students have worked in cooperative learning groups to explore and present solutions related to thematic topics. During a series of "Portfolio Evenings," students share their explorations and solutions with their parents/families. Each evening begins with brief 20-minute presentations by several cooperative learning groups. Next, students meet with their parents/families individually to share their portfolios. Parents and family members are encouraged to ask questions about the portfolios. Team staff members rotate among student/parent/family groups to answer questions and share student learning benchmarks.

These evening presentations typically are presented at the school, but have been scheduled in neighborhood locations such as a local community center or church.

Section 2

Essential Elements of Effective Conferences

The work of the conference starts before family members meet with you, as school staff, and continues long after the meeting is over. Below, we identify practices described in the literature on school and family conferences that support your collaboration efforts with parents and families before, during, and after conferences.

What should be done before conferences?

- Prior to conferences, talk to families about their goals, concerns and needs for information or problem-solving. This may be accomplished through phone calls or personal contacts with families.
- Encourage parents to review any work that their adolescents bring home and to note questions, concerns, and comments to bring to the conference.
- Provide staff development on topics relevant to:
  - conference purposes, scheduling, and format.
  - adolescent development, growth, and strategies used in conferences with adolescents.
  - reflective or active listening techniques, particularly as they relate to working with families of varied cultures, and diverse structures such as extended families, blended families, single parents, custodial and noncustodial parents, or foster parents.
  - the characteristics of effective schools that create an inviting school climate.
- Schedule conferences at times that are convenient for both non-working and working parents. Take into account the workshifts, days, and schedules of both parents and the community's primary employers.
- Provide alternative locations for conferences such as community centers or churches.
- Notify participants of upcoming conferences in a timely manner.
- Print conference schedules, materials, and school announcements in multiple languages, as needed.

What should be done during conferences?

- Provide security, where needed, for evening conferences and meetings.
- Provide child care, refreshments and transportation, if needed.
- Conduct telephone conferences and home visits, as necessary.
- Greet families on arrival and provide easy-to-follow directions to conference areas.
- Throughout the school, prominently display student work that reflects the diversity of the school's families. Schedule student performances prior to or after conferences.
- Actively share and listen for information that has an impact on the student's academic, social, and emotional growth, such as interests and learning styles at home.
- Recognize parents as partners in defining and solving problems. Develop a mutual action plan based upon the school and home learning environment.
- Avoid the use of educational jargon.
- Keep the conference personal and informal. Create a comfortable and private physical environment.
- Demonstrate sensitivity to unspoken messages. For example, do not sit with a desk between you and family members.
- Provide a translator, if needed, for non-English speaking families.
- Communicate a willingness to schedule additional conferences, as necessary, at times that are convenient for family members.
- Provide resources and materials such as booklets that families can use at home to build students' skills.

What should be done after conferences?

- Provide parents with specific times during which they may call you or other teachers.
- Plan to meet again with parents if you agree on follow-up activities.
- Record and address any suggestions made and any questions raised during the conference.
- Ask families for written or oral evaluations of the conference and suggestions for improving their effectiveness.
- Keep parents informed of any steps that you or other school personnel have taken and follow-up with parents on any actions that they were going to take.
- Share non-confidential information you gained about students/families you have in common with your colleagues; seek non-confidential information about students/families.
- Contact other school staff where issues discussed involve their work.

An Appropriate Format for Effective Conferences

The format that is most appropriate for you and your school depends on the following factors:

- *the relationship between your school and the families that you serve;*
- *the needs and purposes that you have for family/school communications;*
- *the content of information to be exchanged;*
- *the characteristics, such as structure and philosophy, of your school;*
- *the needs and characteristics of the students, families, and the community that you serve; and*
- *the schoolwide policies and practices that will support your conference methods and strategies.*

As you clarify the functions, contexts, and policies supportive of your conferencing efforts, record your thoughts on the chart on the next page, or on page 13. Compare your conference elements to those of the other schools. Note any similarities and differences that exist. Notice the conference strategies that are used to address issues similar to yours and focus on aligning your specified needs to strategies that will best satisfy them. Finally, determine what school policies are needed to support new conference strategies or refinements, promote staff development, and/or foster innovative collaborations.

Summary

As emphasized at the start of this booklet, student success is fostered when families and schools are seen as partners. Students and families have information vital to school personnel to help them understand and appreciate family values and student interests, needs, and talents. When families are well informed about specific school structures and procedures, they can help their children with the changes and adjustments common during the transition from elementary school to middle school. Involved middle grade parents and families have a greater likelihood of making the transition with their children and staying involved at the secondary level.

Comparison of Conference Elements

Conference Element	Carver	Grant	Elk Meadow	Lincoln	Your School
Communication Purposes	• Assess progress • Plan student goals and programs • Joint problem solving • Student involvement	• Exchange information about students • Set student goals • Joint problem solving and follow up	• Establish face to face relationships • Teachers present information regarding student performance and behavior	• Teachers transmit program information • Students assess progress • Joint problem solving	
Focus of Exchange	• Previous student work and assessments • Student goal setting	• Portfolios • Self assessment • Narrative report from teacher	• Student assessments • Performance on assignments • Attendance	• Group presentations • Student and teacher assessments • Portfolios	
Family and Community Context	• Rural, exurban • Economic diversity • High levels of parent involvement	• Highly diverse economically • Cultural homogeneity • Urban • High community involvement	• Many concerned parents for school to serve • Suburban • Involved communities	• Suburban setting • Highly diverse population due to desegregation • Varied degree of family participation	
Student Characteristics	• Diversity of motivation, interests and academic performance	• Broad range of student motivation	• Relatively homogeneous in culture and economics • Average to high motivation among students	• Broad range of student motivation and academic performance	
School Context	• Advisory Groups • Counselors support advisors • Middle school philosophy	• Students direct own programs • Alternative pedagogy in school • Individualized curriculum	• Large student population • Highly departmental • Autonomous teachers and classrooms	• Large student population • Team approach to creating learning "families" • Use of alternate units	
School Policies	• Conference preparation time • Two conferences a year plus at parent request	• Pre-class and quarterly conferences • Information passed to relevant teachers • Conference evaluations	• All faculty present for all parents • Student presence is optional • Conference evaluations	• Open House • Team conferences, flexible scheduling • "Portfolio Evenings" after each semester	
School Procedures	• 30 minute conference • Scheduling by letter and telephone • Student and teacher assessments	• Schedule by letter and telephone • Preset conference days and as needed • Transportation assistance • Refreshments	• Schedule publicity • Refreshments • Child care provided	• Flexible scheduling • Release time • Joint team planning • Preset "Portfolio Evenings," flexible locations	

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Worksheet

Notes on School & Family Conferences

Instructions: Use this worksheet as you think about conferences in your school

Annotated Resource List

Making conferences work for parents, teachers, and children

by G. Bjorklund & C. Burger
Young Children, January 1987, pp. 26-31

This article provides guidelines for conference format and process, strategies for success, and discusses the use of conferences in a comprehensive program of development for young children.

Communication skills and strategies: Workshop leader's guide

by L. Cale
in Building school-family partnerships for learning: Workshops for urban educators (in press)
U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement
Washington D.C., 1993.

This guide leads school staff through a series of activities and presentations, based on research and practice, that will increase their capacity to foster good home-school partnerships through better communication, including the use of conferences.

For further information, write or call:

United States Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
555 New Jersey Ave., NW Washington, DC 20208-5649
(202) 219-2211

How parent-teacher conferences build partnerships

by R. Canady & J. Seyfarth
Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation
Bloomington, IN, 1979.

This pocket-sized monograph deals with all aspects of organizing and conducting conferences. It is practical in focus and contains numerous examples and specific steps to follow.

For further information, write or call:

Phi Delta Kappa International Headquarters
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, IN 47402
(812) 339-1156

Communicating with parents

by J. Chrispeels, M. Bourta, & M. Daugherty
San Diego County Office of Education
San Diego, CA, 1988.

A notebook containing an extensive listing and discussion of activities, procedures, forms, and media, this comprehensive guide is aimed at teachers and administrators. A Home-School Partnership Planner is included.

For further information, write or call:

San Diego County Office of Education
6401 Linda Vista Road
San Diego, CA
92111-7399
(619) 292-3500

Parental rights and responsibilities in the educational process

by M. Henniger
The Clearing House, 1987, Volume 60, pp. 226-229.

This article points out that both school staff and family members must prepare for communication and exchange as well as expect access to each other, and systematically discusses those expectations and responsibilities.

Information for parents #2: Parent/teacher conferences.

distributed by the National Committee for Citizens in Education
Columbia, MD, 1991.

This pamphlet summarizes the information on conferences most requested in calls to the NCCE Help-Line. Available in English and Spanish.

For further information, write or call:

National Committee for Citizens in Education
900 2nd St., N.W. Suite 8
Washington, D.C.
20002-3557
1-800-NETWORK

Parent-teacher conferencing: What research says to the teacher (2nd edition)

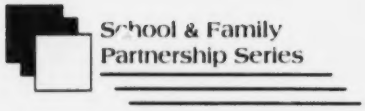
by J.C. Rotter, E. H. Robinson, & M. A. Fey
National Education Association
Washington, D.C., 1987.

This kit includes a booklet, filmstrip, and cassette and is designed to help teachers select conferencing strategies that are research based.

For further information, write or call:

NEA Professional Library
P.O. Box 509
Westhaven, CT 06516

NOTES



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